

Boney M singer Bobby Farrell dies at 61

Charismatic frontman dies on tour in St Petersburg after performing despite concerns about his health

Bobby Farrell fronts Boney M on a 2009 tour of Germany. Photograph: Joerg Carstensen/EPA

Martin Wainwright

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The charismatic frontman of Boney M, Bobby Farrell, has died on tour in St Petersburg after finishing a gig despite medical concerns.

The 61-year-old, who brought the Caribbean carnival tradition of his native Aruba to western pop, had complained of breathing problems before and after the show.

His agent, John Seine, said that "heart problems, shortage of breath and problems with his stomach" had plagued the performer for 10 years, but had never dented his love of performing live. A natural showman, Farrell made slick dance routines and exotic costumes as much a part of Boney M appearances as the music.

The most famous person to come out of Aruba – a tiny island nation which along with Curacao and Sint Maarten are part of the Netherlands – he towered over the women who took the other three places in the group. His signing in 1975 gave a new lease of life to an odd collective, which primarily performed to music pre-recorded by the German singer and composer Frank Farian.

Farrell was seldom involved in studio recordings of the group's many hits such as Rivers of Babylon and Brown Girl in the Ring. His forte was live performance, when his sometimes ragged voice worked well and his movements were a whirl of bare midriff, tight bell-bottoms, huge afro hair-do and spidery reach and height.

"I like to look good on stage and to release all my energy in my shows," he said on his website recently. "The energy in my music has no limit. I want people to

feel entertained and to hear the love that I have for creating music, translated into my songs."

Farrell was involved in a succession of dramatic splits and makeups with Farian, leaving the group more than once after allegations of unreliability. But his career continually reignited after initial stardom in the 1970s, and he barnstormed the international concert circuit in the 1990s and the first decade of this century.

"He was a fantastic person, quite bizarre," said Seine. "He had a big heart but he was also explosive."

Born Alfonso Farrell, he was brought up amid Aruba's rich musical combination of carnival songs and processions, mixed with religious ceremonies from the Dutch colonial era. He left school at 15 to work as a sailor, but jumped ship in Norway and set himself up as a DJ.

Modest success took him to Germany where he was spotted by Farian, who had invented Boney M as a pseudonym, taken from an Australian TV series. Music was Farian's strength but he needed a sexy and attention-catching cast to present curiosities such as Baby Do You Wanna Bump, which he recorded entirely himself in 1974, singing both deep bass and falsetto parts.

Farrell proved his worth with Daddy Cool, which was Britain's number one for five weeks in 1978, the same year as Rivers of Babylon made the top spot. His own Boney M team played to wild acclaim up to his death, with an Abba-like repertoire of past golden hits to sing. Following tours of the United States, Colombia, Turkey, Finland and Slovakia, he was due to release a new album and tour Italy this spring.

He was found dead by staff at St Petersburg's Ambassador hotel after failing to respond to a wake-up call. A Dutch speaker, he lived near Amsterdam, where he leaves a son and a daughter.

<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/dec/30/bobby-farrell-boney-m-singer-dies>